

of May, in which they had not concurred. * It was never,' so they complained, 'assented to or granted by the Commons, but whatever was said about it has been without their consent. Let it now be annulled, for it was not the intention of the Commons, to be tried for heresy, nor to bind over themselves or their descendants to the prelates more than their ancestors had been hi time past.'¹

The English were not accustomed to religious persecution. Although in the Continental countries the Inquisition had for more than a century been working for the suppression of thought with the same remorseless and successful cruelty which it afterwards opposed to the Reformation, the heretic at the stake was a thing scarcely known in mediaeval England. There had hitherto been no recognised heresy in oui\country. A few foreign refugees, and a deacon who had turned Jew for love of a Jewess, are almost the only victims on record. But now that heresy had become rife, it was no longer so easy as it might once have been to introduce an inquisition. The Church was growing unpopular, and the power of the priest over the lay conscience and intellect was being loosened. The enforcement of penance was becoming more difficult and rare; its commutation for money was an absurd farce; and the Church authorities were associated in many minds with avarice, blackmail, and superstitious cults, which the better sort of laymen openly derided. This tone of scorn pervades the lay literature of the period. A hundred years before it would have been easy for the Bishops to obtain the services of the sheriffs for the suppression of errors, but the Commons were now in a less reverential mood, and not inclined, as they confessed, * to bind over themselves or their descendants to the prelates/ While the King and the nobility were eager to trample out heresy, the Knights of the Shires were chiefly desirous of securing the layman's liberty from clerical interference. They had no wish to be priest-ridden.

It is difficult to say whether, apart from a dislike of the clergy, many members of the Lower House were at this time actually heretical. Heresy certainly spread among country gentlemen and merchants in the next few years, and already

¹ *Rot. Parl.*, iii. 141,